LOVE AND LIVE
A Christian Suggestion About Happiness
Muskingum, Thursday afternoon

VAM II

My proposal, in conclusion, is profoundly simple. It is so simple, in fact, that I often wonder if I have not misunderstood something terribly important. Have you ever done that? Have you ever listened to a whole lecture in the vague dis - ease that you missed the first and most fundamental premise? Sometimes that is what I think when I reflect on Christian faith and my life. My proposal is so simple that I'm almost ashamed to haul it out on a college campus.

It is this. Christianity is about happiness. The fundamental, essential product of the exercise is happiness. There are times and places where other ideas are more prominent and more appropriate: ideas like discipleship, faithfulness, sacrifice, commitment, persecution. But in all times and all places the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about happiness. "Blessed are the poor in spirit - blessed are those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty"... "Blessed" is too pious - too sticky, as in "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine", or "Blessed Virgin". The Greek really means happy: "Happy are you when men revile and persecute you." That's more to the point. And it was Thomas Oden, I think, who mused that the early Christians were absolutely fearless, absurdly happy and always in trouble.

It is our secret - perhaps too well kept, but I invite you to explore it with me now...A Christian Suggestion about Happiness...

"There must be something more to life than having everything." That's what Jules Feiffer observes in a delightful new book, Tantrum, a cartoon novel about a forty-two year man who becomes two years old again and returns to total self-indulgence. That, Feiffer says, - that return to almost infantile self-indulgence is what is happening in American culture.

The English film director Blake Edwards has said the same thing in a devastating motion picture, "10". Edwards has said it so cleverly that millions of Americans are laughing at the comedy - which is good, and ogling Bo Derek who has earned the label "10", without ever hearing the fundamental and serious criticism of a culture which has decided apparently that the pursuit of pleasure is the most important process and the noblest quest in life. "10", about another forty-two year old man who makes an utter fool out of himself pursuing a beautiful young woman, is ultimately a poignant and sad movie which dramatically documents the bankruptcy of the going definition of happiness.

And that? Happiness according to American culture as a new decade begins? I believe it has four elements: youth, affluence, power and self-gratification. Let's examine each.

We are obsessed with youthfulness - we spend billions of dollars to disguise the physiological changes which accompany aging. A happy person is a fifty year old who looks thirty; a forty-two year old in the middle of adolescence. Second, affluence - we are told every day that "things" will produce

happiness: furniture, cars, clothes, gadgets - if we can afford enough, accumulate enough we will be happy.

Historian Daniel Boorstin believes we are badly misled by the cult of rising expectations...He writes: "We expect too much of the world. We expect our house not only to shelter us, to keep us warm in the winter and cool in the summer, but to relax us, to encompass us with soft music and interesting hobbies, to be a playground, a theater and a bar...We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible - far more than the world can deliver."

Third, power - control are, in a sense, the derivatives of wealth. Our culture seems to say that we are a failure nationally if we can't control the behavior and destiny of the whole world. We talk about "losing" nations as if we owned the place personally, we love the feeling that we - alone - are masters of our destiny, that we call the shots and are consumately in control. When things get out of control, even in the intimacy of our daily calendar, we get very nervous and very unhappy. And fourth, gratification - instantly - that's where it all comes to rest. We want it all - now. We are not willing to wait. We are not willing to sacrifice for something so vague as the welfare of the next generation. James Reston wondered editorially several weeks ago about the morality of a nation willing to offer up lives of American young people rather than conserving gasoline. We seem almost anxious to send in the Marines.

Some of that always has been self-evidently false. Youth, after all, is a temporary condition. Anyone whose happiness is tied to it is going to be unhappy for most of life. Some has become glaringly false in light of our current situation. Affluence, for instance: more and more responsible scholars are suggesting that we must lower our expectations and begin to think about much more modest life styles. Some economists are talking about scarcity within decades and Presbyterian theologian Albert Curry Wynn wrote recently, "We must learn to live simply so that others may simply live."

Emerging in the new world of the 1980's is the idea that we are not a totally independent nation, in control always, that our destiny is inevitably tied up with the rest of the human family, like it or not. Columnist Michael Novak wrote in an editorial, "For generations peasants in Venezuela and Peru have plodded in poverty shipping goods and commodities so that Americans could grow wealthy and healthy: oil, coffee, bananas, copper, zinc. The world has for a long time been interdependent even though that word is only now becoming fashionable." (Cleveland Plain Dealer, 10/26/74)

Our lives, personally, follow much the same model. None of us willed ourselves into existence - we were conceived in someone else's love and born in someone else's pain and danger. None of us made ourselves into what we are today - there are no self-made people. For better or worse we are who we are in relationship with parents, brothers and sisters and a whole host of people who were prese nt to us and influential in very formative ways. Even the orphan, abandoned at

The Gospel of Jesus Christ suggests there is another happiness. It is so altogether different that it requires a conversion to experience it. You won't stumble into it watching television commercials. You won't even see much of it on religious TV programs. But to follow Jesus Christ very far is to begin to discover it. It requires a kind of single minded obedience. We have to keep our eyes on him, or we will slip back and start believing that a new car or a new sexual conquest or a new job really is the key to our happiness. The Christian faith maintains that there is another happiness available to anyone who decides to follow Jesus Christ. I don't know anyone who has thrown himself or herself into it and is miserable. I don't know anyone who works very hard for others who is unhappy. That is to say, it works. It is the truth. It is borne out in experience.

This other happiness - is letting go of power and influence and the need to manipulate in the knowledge that whatever power we may think we have is at best very short term: that God alone is in control. It is releasing our grip on our things a bit, acknowledging that none of it is permanent; that the most precious possessions of all are our gifts, given to us by other people, ultimately given to us by God himself. This happiness is in the remarkable discovery of our true self the moment we forget about self: the finding of life by losing life: receiving in the very act of giving, living by loving. Robert Frost caught it, I think, in a poem, To Earthward.

"I had the swirl and ache
From sprays of honeysuckle
That when they're gathered shake
Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those
seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung.

Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.